

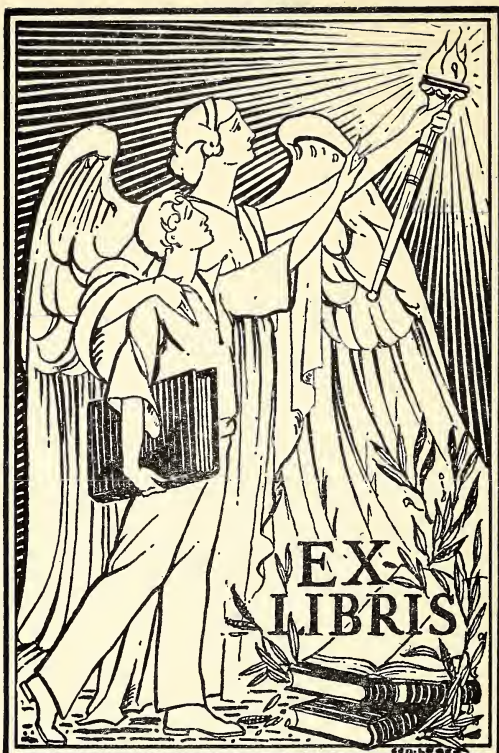
Christmas Bells

and other poems



by Robert Smithdas

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AMERICAN FOUNDATION
FOR THE BLIND INC.

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CHRISTMAS BELLS
and other poems

by
ROBERT SMITHDAS

vol. 4

in the series, "There is a Silver Lining"

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These poems by Robert Smithdas are part of the series, "There is a Silver Lining," which seeks to demonstrate the sensitivity to surroundings and the reactions of a man both deaf and blind. The publication is offered with warmest gratitude to the generous friends and patrons of The Industrial Home for the Blind. Since the appearance of the last volume in this series, Mr. Smithdas has published his autobiography, "Life at My Fingertips" (DOUBLEDAY), an inspired and heartwarming narrative of one man's struggle against overwhelming odds.

The Publishers

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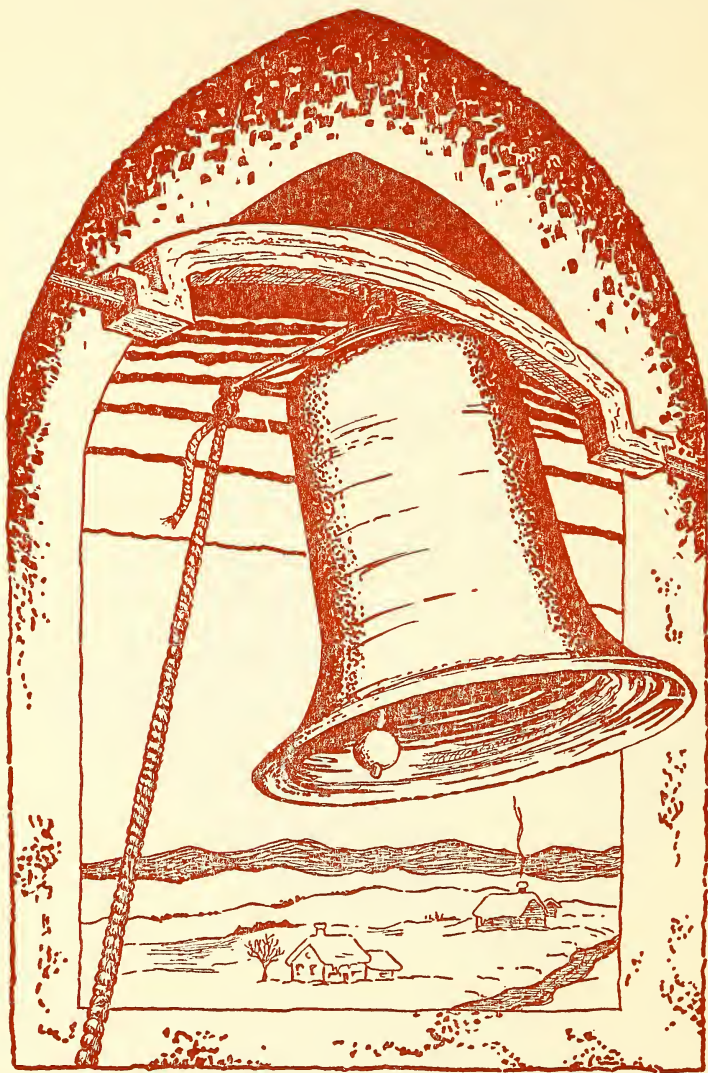
ROBERT J. SMITHDAS

*counselor to the Community Relations Department
of The Industrial Home for the Blind
and permanent secretary of the IHB League*

Dedication

... TO THE MANY KIND FRIENDS
who have made my work, and the work of
The Industrial Home for the Blind, possible.

R. S.



Christmas Bells

One of the oldest traditions of Christmastime is the playing of churchbells at midnight on Christmas Eve. From the days of my childhood, I remember how the bells rang out with deep golden voices, each chime falling with startling clearness through the frosty silence of night. For me they sang of hope and joy, and the promise of abundant love and happiness.

With one glad voice, the joyous bells toss down
Their Christmas blessings on the midnight town;
From every far blue corner of the sky,
“Good will to men, and peace on earth!” they cry.

Their music fills the hollows of the night
With ancient joy, and love’s renewed delight;
And in my heart their golden echoes play
Long after the last chime has died away.

Most of us have had the exhilarating experience of dabbling our fingers in running water—perhaps in a brook, or in the rushing torrent of a mountain stream. The water seems to change with our moods, and yet it has continuity like a concert of coolness under the pattern of sunshine and the shade of overhanging trees.



The Brook

For me, the brook was silent till I dipped
My fingers deep into its foaming flood;
Then I felt music singing in my blood
As each swift ripple broke away and skipped
Down the green funnel of its banks again:
I felt the soothing softness of a croon;
The tinkling laughter of a gypsy tune;
And the brisk cadence of an old refrain.

It seemed to know the songs I loved the best,
And sang their verses without pause for rest
In an unending, changing harmony,
Until at last I drew a drowsy sigh—
And then it changed its headlong rhapsody
Into a tender, sleepy lullaby.

High in the mountains of western Colorado, Dream Canyon is a beautiful rocky glen, watered by a tumbling glacial stream. I spent two blissful summer holidays in a cabin there; and I have never forgotten the pines, the whispering aspens, and the mountainsides carpeted with wild flowers. The primitive splendor of the mountains is there, as rugged and timeless as ever, steeped in the breath of the forest and the fragrance of wild blooms.

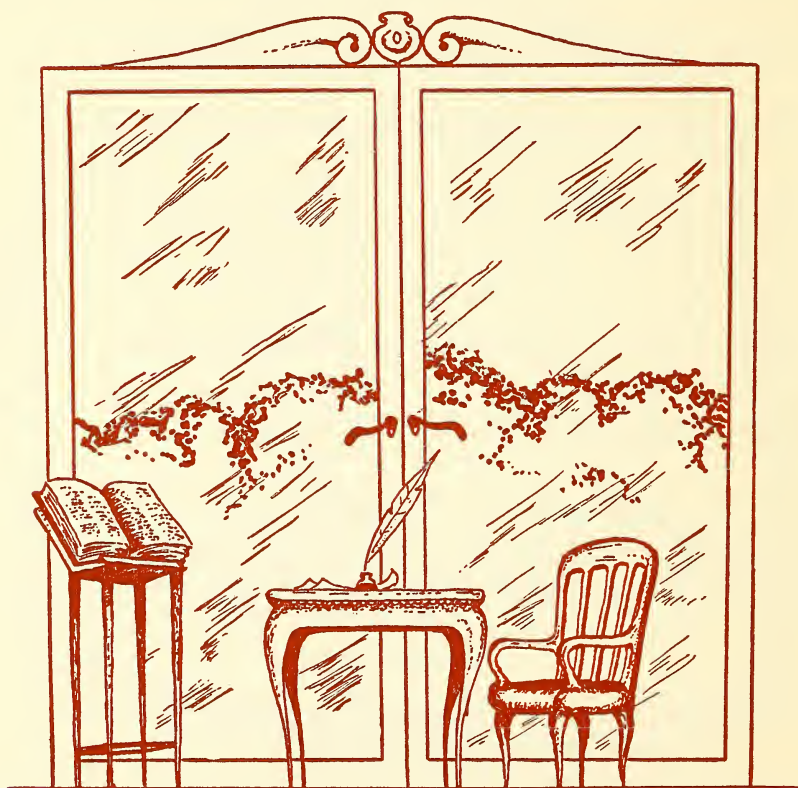


Dream Canyon

Water and wind groined out these mountain-walls
From centuries of granite, quartz and flint;
Here, where the hush of forest silence falls,
Eternity breathes clover, pine and mint.

Time has no measure here, except the beat
Of singing waters on the living rock;
For far from any city's clangorous street,
Only the changing seasons keep their clock.

Speech is such a natural process that most of us rarely consider the potent power of the words we utter. Words give expression to our emotions and moods; they convey our thoughts and feelings in speech and writing with wonderful accuracy. Without the gift of coherent language, we would find it difficult to give adequate expression to our desires and needs.



Words

Words hold a hidden magic all their own:
One word can pierce the soul of things unknown;
One phrase can shake an empire to its knees,
Or sow the seed of unborn dynasties.

One word of praise can fan ambition's fire,
Or rock a heart with love and love's desires;
An angry word of carelessness or blame
May fill a lifetime with remorse or shame.

Some words are wise; and there are foolish words;
Words sad as grief, or gay as singing birds;
Some words recall forgotten loveliness,
And there are words which fill us with distress.

Sung in a song, or murmured in a prayer;
Written in books, or breathed into the air—
Words have a magic power to wound or bless.

During an illness which confined me to my home for several days, I awoke one morning to experience a strange sensation. Still drowsy with the dregs of sleep, I was suddenly obsessed by the feeling that an old friend was coming to visit me. This presentiment persisted throughout the day; and in the evening, just as I was beginning to doubt its credibility, my charming visitor actually arrived. This incident has always puzzled me, for I had no reasonable explanation for its occurrence.

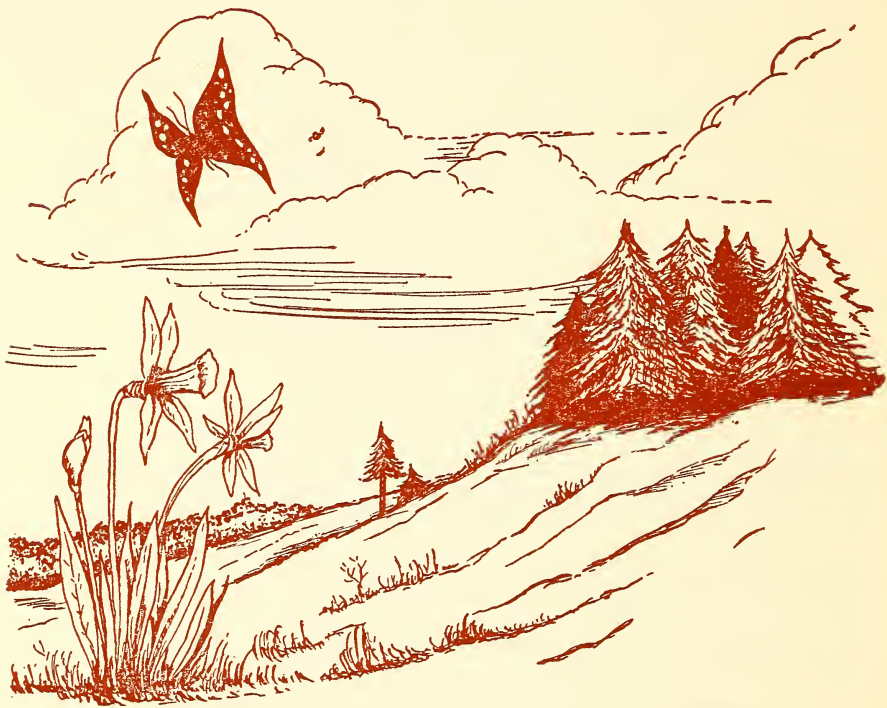


Clairvoyance

Somehow I knew that you would come today:
Half dreaming and half waking, suddenly,
I felt that time and space had rolled away,
And you were standing there—so close to me
That, if I had reached out my hand, I could
Have touched your own, or stroked your shining hair;
And all day long I felt a rising flood
Of certainty that you would soon be there.

Then, when the evening came and you had come,
I wondered by what magic bridge I'd spanned
Those boundless gulfs that held our lives apart.
But when I felt the pressure of your hand,
My wonder faded, and I felt my heart
Throb like the pulsing thunder of a drum.

I was reading a story of southern rural life when I happened across a vivid scene which particularly captivated my imagination. Inspirations for poems have unpredictable origins, and here is one which was inspired by nothing more than a verbal picture of a summer's night in the deep South.

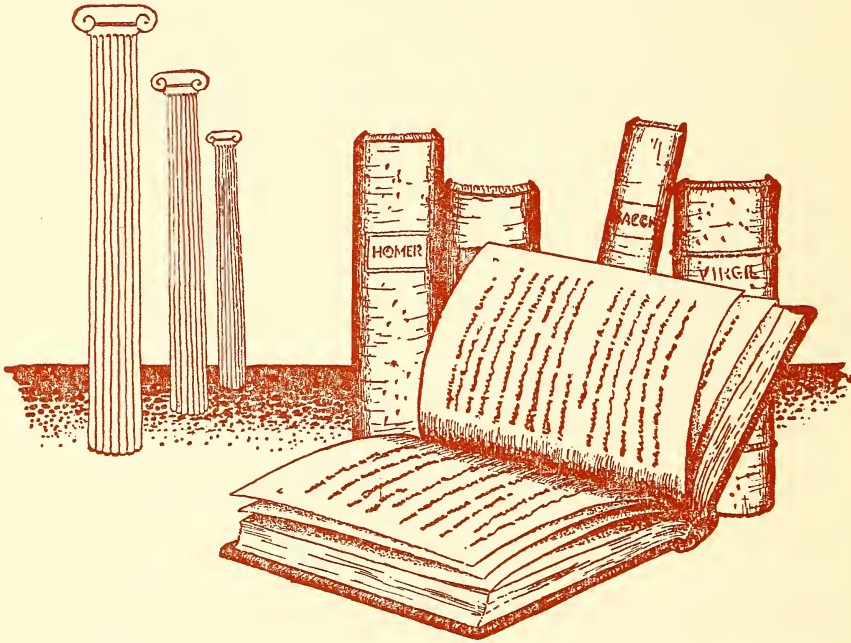


Serenade in Spring

Some evening when night's shawl of stars has fallen
About the round brown shoulders of these hills,
And all the world is smothered in the fragrance
Of lilac-bloom and early daffodils,
I'll come along the wood-path from the valley
And stand beneath your window by the stream,
Singing sweet songs full of white drifted moonlight,
Red roses, and love's old familiar dream.

You will not see me, hidden in deep shadow;
But if you listen, surely you will know
That somewhere in the darkness of the pine-grove
There is a heart that, beating to and fro,
Moves to the rhythm of an ageless music
Old as the earth itself, and yet as new
And young as April bursting into blossom,
With all my love in grace-notes singing through.

Ever since I was a very young child, books have been my joy and my hobby. Between the covers of books I have always found a tantalizing wealth of history, romance, adventure and wisdom. By identifying myself with the book which I am reading, I can share the glories of the past, the realities of the present, and the dreams of the future.



I've voyaged pathless seas from shore to shore,
And marched through trackless wastes of
 burning sand;
I've climbed high mountains never scaled before;
I've wandered to the edge of sky and land,
And out beyond the starry ring of space
To where dark planets still uncharted swim;
I've known the men and gods of every race,
And seen beyond the future's distant rim.
I watch the rise and fall of old empires,
And dine with Caesar when it pleases me;
Or sit beside the glow of pagan fires;
Or share the twilight hours on Calvary.
Out of the wisdom of a volume's pages,
I draw the life and times of golden ages.

Autumn is a colorful, fruitful season which appeals to all of us. John Keats, in his ODE TO AUTUMN, has personified the season as a beautiful deity with golden hair. From memory I remember the turning of the leaves on October trees, and the vivid coloring of woodlands under a burnished sky; and I often wonder whether the gift of sight is as fully appreciated for its wonderful richness.



Autumn Monograph

There's a glory in the woodlands and the fields
That only autumn splendor ever yields;
Spring's living colors never could unfold
Such burning tints of scarlet, black and gold.

With rosy cheeks pressed hard against the sky,
Red apples kiss the falling leaves goodbye;
While through the trees, and down across the ground,
Summer on fire blazes without a sound.

No artist ever planned, with thoughtful eyes,
A lovelier picture with more brilliant dyes.
But listen!—there's a sound along the lane:
A blind man tapping sharply with his cane.

Death has always been a popular theme for poets, and the variety of interpretations of this particular subject seem numberless. When one of my dearest friends passed away several years ago, I was inspired by an old Mexican tradition. The Mexicans view death with a native poetry of their own; they say "God has remembered him."



On the Death of a Friend

In one brief instant, he was there,
And then he slipped away,
Fading mysteriously like light
That fuses into a starless night
At the close of a golden day.

We thought he was asleep, until
We saw the sunset smile
That flickered on the forenoon of his face,
As if some unfathomable grace
Was resting there awhile.

We could but dimly understand
This sudden, unwonted change
In one who had laughed with the best of us,
Loved, and been loved by the rest of us,
But now lay silent and strange.

From birth we begin a cycle of experience which eventually brings us to maturity and determines our personalities. It is surprising how many seemingly trivial occurrences contribute to give us individuality. Physical and mental growth are not ordinarily considered poetic, and yet they have an underlying dignity which is undoubtedly part of the great poetry of life.



Life

Out of the clay of common earth,
The wise Creator gave me birth;
Into my inert soul He poured
Those precious blessings of the Lord:
Rich springs of love, and grief, and mirth.

Then, with a gentle breath, He stirred
My life to flame, so that I heard
And saw the beauty and harmony
Of field and stream, of flower and tree,
The songs of wind and water and bird.

A child of sun and wind and rain,
Impulsive, passionate and vain,
I grew to manhood; and began
To heed the changeless truths of Man,
The balm of joy, the sting of pain.

In the dim mirror of my soul,
I watch life's hurrying years unroll;
And from their incessant interchange
Of things both beautiful and strange,
I glimpse the pattern of the Whole.



A Manifesto

Occasionally, one of my friends asks me to compose a poem on a purely personal theme, but I rarely fulfill such requests. I have always preferred to write spontaneously, using the material which inspires me at any given moment. However, this particular poem was written because I had promised to compose it for a special friend as a gesture of esteem and affection.

All night my dreams, on restless silver wings,
Darted like doves across the fields of sleep;
Against your heart they sang a thousand Springs
Blazing with beauty, so intense and deep
Remembering them would drown the stars
 with shame.
Under your heart they sang, and would not rest;
Not till the dawn burst on the world like flame—
Only to leave them brooding in my breast.

One of the earliest flowers of springtime, the crocus grows in sunny, sheltered places, peeping out shyly from under the huddle of last year's leaves. It is a dainty flower with a delicate fragrance; yet it always seems to bloom before the melting snow has scarcely gone. It seems even more characteristic of spring than the violet, another tiny promise of summer suns.

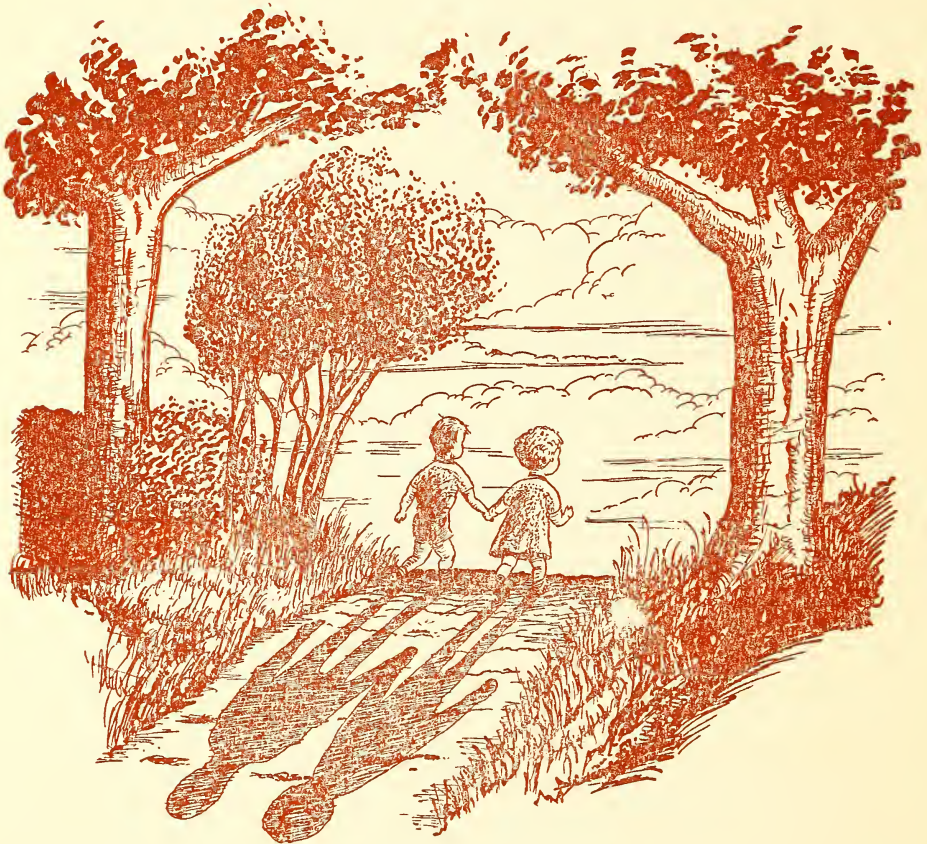


Crocus

This flower that smells of honey and the spring
Was forged by fairy hammers underground,
From fallen starlight that the fairies found
And wrought into a lovely, fragile thing.

I left it where I found it in the grass—
A tiny chalice with a scalloped rim,
As smooth as silk, and thin as blown glass,
Filled with the wine of Springtime to the brim.

We usually think of the meaning of beauty in terms of color, shape and design; yet there are qualities of imagination which transcend the bounds of physical appearance into the realm of the abstract. A philosopher may have a "beautiful soul;" the relationship between two friends may be beautiful; and there are numerous other examples of beauty which is not seen, yet is startlingly evident to us. One of the loveliest lines in English literature is Herrick's evanescent portrait of a friend: "There is a garden in her face."



Beauty

They say the soul of beauty is no more
Than light reflected from the shapes of things;
But when I touch a lilac's clustered stars,
Or sense its fragrance flooding on spring winds
I know that there is hidden loveliness
Beyond the colored glory in our eyes.
Deep in the heart of autumn fruit, I taste
The sweetness of a summer's golden life;
And in a child's soft, uncertain hand
There is the unimagined mystery
Of years undreamed, of conquests unfulfilled,
Of love unborn, of cities still unknown.
By the brief candle of my life I see
Beneath the glowing dyes, the bright designs,
Into the beauty of created things
That lies beyond the passages of sense,
That shimmers in the corners of the heart,
And vibrates in the cadence of a song.



